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ABSTRACT

This study examined New Zealand kindergarten teachers' perceptions or implicit theories of their role in children's learning, the nature of their curriculum, and how they perceived children as learners. Twelve head teachers of urban kindergartens were interviewed on the basis of Carr and Kemmis' (1983) seven categories of teacher knowledge: (1) common sense; (2) folk wisdom; (3) skill knowledge; (4) contextual knowledge; (5) professional knowledge; (6) educational theory; and (7) social and moral theories and general philosophical outlook. Case studies were generated from the interviews and verified by the participants. Four non-mutually exclusive themes that emerged from the interviews are discussed in separate sections. Teachers perceived their role as: (1) making up a gap or deficit; (2) providing an environmental, asking questions, and encouraging experimentation; (3) teaching skills; or, (4) being an expert/parent educator. Extensive quotes from the interviews are included in each section. The way that teachers conceptualize the purposes and outcomes of their curriculum is discussed in terms of four emerging themes: free play/enriched environment, readiness, structure, and talking with teachers. These themes from the interviews concerning teachers' beliefs about children's cognitive and literacy development, and resulting teacher practices, are also discussed. (Contains 49 references.) (MDM)

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Developing literacy at Kindergarten: an examination of teacher's beliefs and practices

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Abstract

This paper details some of the results of research into how literacy development is promoted in New Zealand Kindergartens. Twelve Head Teachers of urban Kindergartens were interviewed regarding their working conditions, programme and beliefs and practices concerned with children's development and learning in Kindergarten. Carr and Kemmis'(1983) categories of teacher knowledge were used as a basis for the interview; these are common sense, folk wisdom, skill knowledge, contextual knowledge, professional knowledge, educational theory and social and moral theories and general philosophical outlooks. Case studies were generated from the interview and verified by the participant teachers. Common themes arising concerning teachers beliefs about children's cognitive and literacy development, and resulting practices are discussed.

Introduction

For many years, the preschool years in New Zealand were seen as the period for getting children "ready" for formal instruction upon starting school at the age of five. Many early childhood centres, particularly the Playcentre movement, have espoused the notion of a "free play curriculum" as a reflection of their philosophy of child centred, active learning through play (Meade, 1985). The influence of "free play" is reflected in the curriculum of many New Zealand Kindergartens and childcare centres to various degrees.

Research in recent years has highlighted the importance of these years for learning the concepts and functions of reading and writing, skills which are built upon during formal education. Many centres encourage "pre-reading" activities, such as group story book sessions, as a way to promote the easy transition to school. However, recent research into emergent literacy suggests that children develop literacy skills long before they reach school, and that this emergent literacy is an integral part of later literacy (Teale and Sulzby, 1987). Clay (1982) states that children come to school armed with a functional knowledge of literacy, which she terms a knowledge of the "concepts of print". The present research set out to explore how children are developing these "concepts of print" at home and at Kindergarten.

The interviews discussed in this paper are part of a doctoral research project involving the interviews conducted with Head Teachers of Kindergartens, survey data of parents and teachers, observation of Kindergarten literacy environments and a small scale action research curriculum development. Interviews with Head Teachers involved exploring the understanding that teachers have of children's development, and how this influences their literacy practices.

Definitions of emergent literacy will be explored in this paper, as will a brief look at the developmental sequence of literacy development. Much of the emergent literacy research has been based on the theoretical principles of Vygotsky (1978), who states that children learn through mediation by competent others. A "literacy-rich" (Morrow, 1989) and "scaffolded" (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1986) learning environment in early childhood centres are proposed as the ideal context in which to develop a knowledge of literacy in a culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate manner. These principles will be contrasted with the prevailing "free play" orientation in New Zealand Kindergartens, which is usually linked with Piagetian theory. Teachers "implicit theories" (Spodek, 1988) of their role in children's learning and how they view their curriculum will be examined in relation to theoretical positions and to relevant research.

Defining emergent literacy

Emergent literacy can be defined as the beginning of literacy development, but not simply as a cognitive skill to be learned. Teale and Sulzby (1989) define it as a complex sociopsycholinguistic activity. This simply means that the social and contextual aspects of literacy are integral. Teale and Sulzby (1989) suggest that there are five major aspects to be considered in terms of emergent literacy. These are:

1) That for most children in a literate society, learning to read and write begins early in life. For example , they begin to recognise signs and labels and make attempts at reading and writing long before formal instruction.

2) That the functions of literacy are an integral part of the learning process taking place. This means that children see adults using literacy for a purpose that is goal oriented.

3)That reading and writing develop concurrently and interrelatedly in young children.

4) That children learn through active engagement, constructing their understanding of how written language works.

5) That even more important than demonstration of literacy, are the times parents or teachers can interact around print.

In 1966, Marie Clay coined the term "emergent literacy" to describe the developmental continuities between emergent literacy behaviour and behaviour when the child is able to read independently, Clay's early research showed that children who couldn't read in the full sense of the word, showed sensitivity to letter and word forms, appropriate directional movements, self correction and synchronized matching of spoken word units with written word units. As she then concluded "There is nothing in this research that suggests that contact with printed language forms should be withheld from any five-year-old on the grounds that he is immature" (Clay, 1982, p 22). The fact that Clay observed these prerequisite parts of reading suggest that the child is already cognitively active and has had previous productive experience with print. Holdaway (1985, p.3) states that there is a high correlation between the quantity of material transacted in beginning reading and success and failure in later reading. He recommends a massive increase in early reading and says that slower readers are punished by "criminal print starvation".

Clay's research has sparked curiousity into how children learn these pre-requisite skills to reading, long before commencing formal instruction. Few parents set about actively "teaching" their preschoolers, but something in their daily interaction has been shown to have a beneficial effect for later reading. As Teale and Sulzby comment "children use legitimate reading and writing behaviours in the informal settings of home and community" (1986, p.xviii).

Yetta Goodman (1986) has taken this issue and examined how and where literacy develops in the home environment. She calls her theory of emergent literacy the "five roots of literacy" as a metaphor for the beginnings of reading. She cites the following examples of the "five roots of literacy" and how they are present in the child's environment (Goodman, 1986, p.7).

Root 1 : Development of print awareness in situational contexts. This is the development of knowledge of print embedded in environmental settings, e.g. tins, labels, signs, logos. The research found 60% of 3 year olds can read environmental print in context. At 4-5 years, 80% can.

Root 2 : Development of print awareness in connected discourse. This kind of written material includes books, magazines, newspapers and letters. The conclusions : Ability to handle books is universal - knowing what they are for, how to handle them, what direction they are read and their function.Children between 3-5 learn that print carries the message.

Root 3 : Development of functions and forms of writing. Subjects conceive that writing is different from reading.All subjects respond that they can write.50% of 3 year olds make letters which look like letters, in addition to scribble forms.

Root 4 : The use of oral language to talk about written language. Children develop oral language as they have active experience with written language. Children have numerous opportunities to develop this - preschools, television, advertising, books, all designed for preschoolers to provide them with names of letters, sound, numbers, and rhythm of spoken and written language.

Root 5 : Metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness about written language. This is the ability to analyse and explain the process of language. Goodman narrows her definition to include only statements that show evidence of the child's analysis of the written language process : Children provide metalinguistic statements about language. They use terms appropriately, and make statements about reading and writing when written language is not in view.

As Goodman (1986) presents it, all children receive a comprehensive introduction to literacy. This seems to happen whether it is through the parents actively stimulating or inviting response to the environment, or through the child watching television, other people or the environment's activities in general. Teale's research (1986) set out to trace the relation between the home background and the roots of literacy, with the finding that children from a wide variety of socio economic backgrounds were involved in reading and writing to some degree, from 5 to 53 times per day and spent an average of between 40 minutes and 7.5 hours per day in these activities.

The role of adults in children's learning

Much of the research into emergent literacy has been based on Vygotsky's theories of cognitive and literacy development and has examined the relationships in which children develop literacy. Vygotsky posits a link between an individual's abilities and social relations. As Lock et al (1989) point out :

> It is not the case that interaction *facilitates* the development of such abilities, as though they would develop anyway : rather, interaction must somehow *constitute* them - they would not develop without it. And that process of developing an ability is not one of acquiring it, or putting it together from scratch, but of gaining control of an ability that somehow already exists within social relations. (Lock et al, 1989, p.247).

There are four key terms which are important to an understanding of how a Vygotskian model may be useful to a literacy centred curriculum in New Zealand Kindergartens. Vygotsky proposed that a "zone of proximal development" exists between what the child is able to do alone and what she is able to achieve with help from one more knowledgeable or skilled than himself. He proposed two levels of development; the actual or present level (what children can do on their own, determined by independent problem solving) and the potential level (determined by problem solving which children can achieve by collaboration with an adult or more competent peer). It is the distance between these two levels that Vygotsky (1978) calls the "zone of proximal development". The second is "scaffolding" (Bruner, 1986) or the process whereby an adult or competent peer bridges the zone of proximal development for the child. The adult "ups the ante" in a learning situation, facilitating the child's mastery of a new skill. The other terms which are particularly relevant to a literacy centred curriculum are "access" and "mediation". Vygotsky's notion of access and mediation is useful in examining how the process of learning to read is essentially social in nature (Teale and Sulzby, 1987). Access basically means having appropriate written materials in the home or school, although it tends to implicitly assume a mediator to these materials. Teale and Sulzby indicate that this access enables the child to develop concepts about books and reading; directionality, that print (not pictures) convey meaning, how to locate a word and so forth. They also suggest that children (from 2-6 years) produce language which is different prosodically and syntactically from their normal conversation when they are asked to "read" a favourite story-book. Mediation is a more complex issue; as the same story-book can be mediated differently by different teachers, parents or families. Wells (1981, in Teale and Sulzby, 1987) suggests that there is a quantitative difference in the amount of interaction, but also a

qualitative difference. He proposes that some parents are more effective mediators and promoters of language development than others. This "eliciting style" has been examined by Ninio (1980) with high SES and low SES mothers, with the finding that low SES mothers were less skilled at eliciting responses. Similarly, Heath (1986) found marked differences in communication between Trackton, Roadville and Mainstream communities.

In Tizard and Hughes (1984) study of preschoolers at home and at school, there were some noteworthy differences observed between teachers and parents, which have important implications for curriculum design. The most outstanding difference noted is that parents play with their children, teach specific skills and impart a tremendous amount of information to their children. This information concerns the child's family, babies, household matters and also more general information about science, history and geography. In contrast, early educators talk to children about play and routines, such as picking up toys, listening attentively and following instructions. Tizard and Hughes (1984) conclude that children learn a great deal more in the "scaffolded" environment of the home, despite the inherent difficulties (other children, tired parents, lack of material resources), because of the personally relevant information communicated to the child and the one-to-one teaching. It is important to remember that there are inherent difficulties in applying Vygotsky's (1978) theory to a classroom setting, because so much of the research has focussed on one to one learning episodes (Smith, 1989) and because of the difficulties in accessing the zone of proximal development (Smith, 1989).

Much of the emergent literacy research has shown how literacy develops at home, but it has also examined how important the teachers commitment to talking with children rather than to children is in facilitating literacy development (Meadows and Cashdan, 1988). For this reason, it was important to examine the theoretical orientation of teachers in Kindergartens. Meade (1985) states that "New Zealand free play programmes are based on a philosophy of education which sees the child as an active learner with his or her knowledge being constructed rather than acquired" (p.112). Meade (1985) states that the "free play" philosophy is very widely accepted in New Zealand childcare centres. The teacher's role in the child's learning is in the provision of direct, personal contact and in the arrangement of the learning environment; space, things, time, people. Meade suggests that the free play approach creates the impression that adults set up the environment and that the children do the rest; which would be chaotic. In reality, teachers have adapted strategies for enhancing learning in a free play programme, but many teachers have difficulty in articulating their reasons for their approach. Lazar (1983) found that some people really deny that there is, or should be,

a curriculum. He points out that there is always a curriculum, whether obvious or not. As he stated in 1983 (in Meade, 1985, p.35) :

> Someone selects the materials, the stories and songs. Someone decides on their sequences and availability. Someone rewards or ignores specific behaviours. All of these are curricular decisions. If the teacher is unaware of the educational, social and personal learnings provided by these choices, the child may be cheated, confused or simply pulled in random directions. If the teacher thinks through the goals of the activities, essentially the same materials and activities can be organized into a coherent programme for optimal learning and development.

A "free play" philosophy is founded upon the belief that the child actively constructs knowledge of the world. Such a view has theoretical roots in Piagetian theory (Wood, 1988). Piaget's theory, which proposes the child as an "active learner", suggests that the child's intercourse with the physical world provides the main constraints and contributions to the development of intelligence; the child learns as she acts upon objects in space and time. In this way it is the "things" of the environment which play a major role in the child's development. In New Zealand, the Piagetian influence has developed through the "free play" philosophy of the Playcentre movement, which was heavily influenced by the teachings of Susan Isaacs who visited New Zealand shortly before the second world war (Cook, 1985).

"Implicit theories" of teachers

Donaldson (1987) describes two types of thinking which are useful in explaining the sorts of knowledge that teachers may present about their theories of teaching. These are "embedded thinking" in which thinking is embedded in the life of the mind - in a setting of memories, hopes and purposes - if not in the life of the senses and the muscles", and "disembedded thinking", which is steered by logical or formal argument, by using goals of science to describe or explain phenomena in "universal terms" that stand apart for experience (Bruner, 1986).

Maxine Greene (1988) describes a teacher's overriding forces in their stories about their beliefs as "governing obsessions", and suggests that they tell a lot about what people believe to be "good practice" (in Genishi, 1992). Gensishi (1992) states that practices described by teachers may be features of "theories of practice" (p.198) or those theories about children, development, learning and assessment that underlie teacher's curricular decisions and interactions. They can be contrasted with "theories of development" outlined by Fein and Schwartz (1982), which are an account of growth and change from birth to adulthood.

Theories of development are descriptive, they explain how development does occur, not how it should occur. A theory of development is passive regarding

children's learning environments. It does not address the question of how adults can enhance development through teaching strategies or activities. Theories of practice on the other hand, apply to particular children and teachers in educational settings. These theories are prescriptive and lead to recommendations about how adults should view development and moreover how they should arrange environments for children (Genishi, 1992). Some examples of theories of practice are the NAEYC guidelines and the "whole language" programmes (Edelsky, Altwerger and Flores, 1991).

Fein and Schwartz (1982) recommend a relationship of "reciprocity and mutual dependence between theorists of development and practice. However, Genishi states that few women in her study clearly articulated theory or verified it. Most adopted an eclectic approach ranging over generations of theory. Similarly, Spodek (1986) suggests that theory in the Kindergarten movement alters over time in response to changing theory regarding learning and development or that Kindergarten theory and social values influence each other.

Spodek (1988) points out that teachers teaching children of the same age with a similar background training and even teaching in the same school may have completely different "implicit theories". The important point about implicit theories is that people are often eclectic or even contradictory in their beliefs and practices. These theories about children's development or teaching methods can operate like self fulfilling prophecies. As Prout and James (1990) state "ways of thinking about childhood fuse with institutionalized practices to produce self conscious subjects (teachers, parents, children) who think (and feel) about themselves through the terms of those ways of thinking" (p.23). The 'truth' about themselves and their situation is thus self validating. Breaking into this with another truth (produced by another way of thinking about childhood) may prove difficult.

This paper does not give a discussion of the teachers answers to individual questions, but has taken a thematic approach across questions to look for Greene's "governing obsessions" or Spodek's "implicit theories". It will address the teacher's perceptions of their role in children's learning, the nature of their curriculum, and how they perceive children as learners, as their perceived role may give insight into their "governing obsessions" or theories of practice or development.

Methods

This data was collected as part of a larger research project, for which the primary aim was to develop a literacy centred curriculum for Kindergarten. Other parts of the research include interviewing parents in six Kindergartens about their literacy practices with their children, and observing literacy practices in the same six

Kindergartens. This part of the research data was to identify the teachers' prevailing beliefs and practices about literacy development . The Head Teacher of each Kindergarten in the urban Palmerston North area (12 centres in total) was interviewed, regarding their beliefs about the type of service they are providing, early child development and education, literacy practices and the contents of their Charter. Teacher's were also asked about their intake of children, to establish an SES profile for the Kindergarten.

Carr and Kemmis (1983) state that a critical analysis is only possible when theory (organised knowledge) and practice (organised action) are treated in a unified way as problematic, and as open to dialectical reconstruction through reflection and revision. They further propose that some kinds of knowledge are more effective for reflection than others. The interview used sought to ascertain teacher knowledge, with a view to examining the similarities between theory and practice in the Kindergarten.

Carr and Kemmis (1983) suggest the following questions of teacher knowledge which were used as a starting point for the interview:

1) Common sense knowledge.
2) Folk wisdom of teachers.
3) Skill knowledge- about certain effective teaching strategies.
4) Contextual knowledge - of this student, class, community or culture.
5) Professional knowledge - teaching strategies and curriculum.
6) Educational theory - development of the individual, the role of education in society.
7) Social and moral theories and general philosophical outlooks.

In addition, the interview commenced with a question about why the teacher had become a Kindergarten teacher and then a question about the SES background of the children attending. The interview concluded with a question about the Chartering process in the Kindergarten (as all licensed centres were obliged to write a Charter before 1991) and if the Charter had shaped their practices.

Permission was gained from the local Kindergarten Association to approach teachers in the city. Before the interview was arranged, a phone discussion with the teachers explained what was intended and then teachers were sent a brief copy of the research proposal. After this was received, teachers were called again to ask if they were prepared to be interviewed and if so, a time was arranged. The time was always arranged to be of convenience to the teacher. Usually this meant a Wednesday or Friday afternoon in the Kindergarten, as these are the session free afternoons.

Giving teachers information about the research and their role in it, was an essential part of the qualitative nature of the research. Oakley (1981) states that it is important to establish a relationship, not just a "rapport", that people need to be given information about the research, to have ethical considerations such as confidentiality

and access to publications/reports and to have questions asked to the interviewer answered openly and honestly. Oakley (1981) describes this as "no intimacy without reciprocity".

Jones (1985) proposes that a view of people as persons who "construct meaning and significance of their realities is useful in conceptualising the interview, as people bring to bear upon events a complex personal framework of their beliefs and values, which they have developed over their lives to categorise, characterise, explain and predict the events in their world. The interview is a way of exploring and understanding the meaning and significance that people give to their actions.

These principles guided the interview. Most teachers asked questions about my interest in early childhood and my teaching position at the university before the interview commenced or on the telephone, while we arranged the interview. Teachers were given a copy of the questions and written consent was obtained before a tape recorder was produced. The interview was started with the question about their own background, as Ely et al (1991) suggest starting with something the person is comfortable with. Teachers were told that the questions (3-9) were categories of teacher knowledge and that they could talk about them in any order. Most talked about them in order, but referred back to earlier categories.

Ely et al (1991) state that an interviewer should provide a focus for the interview, observe, give directions, be sensitive to clues given by participants, probe, question, listen, amalgamate statements and generally be as involved as possible. Above all however, the participant is a "full partner in the endeavour and often provides surprising directions not allowed by other more researcher centred interviews"(p.59).

For these interviews, it meant giving an explanation of the question if required and responding honestly to any questions, without trying to 'lead' the interview or to take up too much 'air time'. Honest answers about the research focus were given and genuine interest and sympathy to their descriptions of sometimes difficult working conditions was expressed. Ely et al (1991) call this "judicious entering", Lather (1989) calls it "interactive, reciprocal self disclosure" and of course Oakley's (1981) "no intimacy without reciprocity".

Part of my ethical considerations was to provide feedback from interviews and to seek verification of summaries of the data. Accordingly, two copies of the interview transcript and "case study" were sent out. Teachers were asked to read and amend one copy of each and to send them back. They were also asked to nominate pseudonyms for themselves and their Kindergarten. They were informed that another interview could be arranged if they were unhappy with the first, but this did not eventuate. Generally the hoped for reflection on their own comments was a really useful addition to the data.

The teachers and the Kindergartens

Twelve Head Teachers were interviewed over a two month period. Most were interviewed in the Kindergarten, although one was interviewed in my home on her way home from work, as that suited her better. Ten of the twelve Head Teachers have their own children, and are over the age of 35. The two teachers without their own children are in their mid twenties. It is interesting to note that only two of the Head Teachers were not in permanent positions at the time of interview. Both were acting as Head Teachers, while the permanent appointee was acting in a more senior capacity in the early childhood service.

The Head Teachers have been teaching a minimum of three years and a maximum of 23 years. Three of the Head Teachers had a break of seven years and four teachers had eight year breaks within their service to have their own families. One of the permanent Head Teachers had been teaching only five years, but the remaining nine teachers had been teaching for over eleven years.

Not all teachers gave fulltime or continuous service. Teacher No.11 did seven years of part time relieving before returning to a permanent position. Teacher No. 12 trained for Kindergarten, then went to university before marrying and having children. She worked for several years as a Teacher Aide in a primary school before returning to Kindergarten teaching five years ago.

The twelve Kindergartens were spread across the city in residential suburbs. One Kindergarten was in school grounds. Two others bordered a school. There were two "two teacher" Kindergartens. Of these, one had a 2:30 ratio, because of little floor space in the Kindergarten, the other had a 2:40 ratio. The remainder of the Kindergartens had 3:40 ratios at the time of interview. It is important to note that since the interviews were conducted, the Association has urged Kindergartens to raise the rolls to 45 children per session where space permits, in order to secure more bulk funding. Kindergartens have been "bulk funded" like childcare centres for a little over a year now.

Kindergartens have children from a range of SES groupings. This range extends from a Kindergarten with a largely monocultural group of professional families with high incomes to another with a large number of ethnic groups, low income families and over the half the population on unemployment or domestic purposes benefits. Many of the Kindergartens had mixtures of these extremes, including the more middle of the range,as Palmerston North's housing is not clearly clustered into asset defined suburbs. Unemployed make up 10% of the working population in Palmerston North, which has a population of approximately 70,000 people. It is a

central service area for a large farming community, with a lot of light industry and a strong education/research component with several tertiary institutions and Crown research institutes.

Role of teachers

There were four strong themes in the ways that teachers perceived their role as teachers, and these were not mutually exclusive. Some of the teachers saw their role as a combination of these roles, which corresponds with Foucault's notion of discourse and with Spodek's"implicit theories". In most cases, many of the teachers have talked about the themes in a variety of ways, but only a few examples have been included. There are undoubtedly many more subthemes which could be analysed.

The four major roles of teachers which were described in this study were:

1) To make up a gap or deficit

2) To provide an environment/ask questions/encourage experimentation

3) To teach skills

4) To be an expert/parent educator

1) A gap or deficit to make up

Not everyone comes in here with the same opportunity. they're not coming form backgrounds with the same opportunity and as an teacher that's part of you professional teaching responsibility, to pick the children that you feel need extra input and work with them. And that may also be gifted children who need extra input to meet their needs as well. And in doing that some people get less of your time than others, and that's a dilemma that you always have as a teacher.(TeacherNo7)

Encouraging the children to expand their horizons and to think further or develop, basically it's an encouraging role, just to develop the concept that's being considered, what the child is showing interest in. Perhaps teaching things where there are gaps, introducing a concept that's missing or could be further developed or leading the child onto the next step.(Teacher No12)

I guess you make value judgements about where they come from. And you've got it set in your own mind the O.K this child comes from a very deprived or limited ...and you decide that that child needs the basic concepts, you assume that ...from their background... that they haven't got that sort of knowledge, so we attempt to either directly teach it, or for that child to sort of assimilate that knowledge.(teacher No8)

The Kindergarten movement in this country has an early history of "rescuing" young children from poverty (Cook, 1985). Early childhood education was conceptualised (Mindes, 1990) earlier this century as an innoculation against failure. The most famous example of this theory is the Head Start research programme. Another notable example is the Perry Preschool /Highscope project (Schweinhart, Weikart and Larner, 1986), which set out to reduce the effects of poverty, deprivation

and disadvantage through a vaccination of early childhood education. Longitudinal research has indicated that such early childhood education may not have the desired academic outcomes, but results in an increased social competence. Most of these examples point to the teachers understanding that all children do not come from what they consider to be privileged backgrounds on a variety of grounds. Teacher No.6's comments about her awareness of the literacy problems that parents have also indicates this.

I tell you what I've noticed, it probably comes under this one, is that we have got quite a few parents who can't read and write. Some are quite open about it, if I give out a notice, and some are very cagey and try to cover it up. I find they have difficulty with education for the children because where do they start? They can't read or write themselves, so how are they going to start reading stories for children. At certain times we have problems with say fund raising or anything we are doing in the Kindergarten, and often it has stemmed back to the notice having gone out, and that particular time the parents we had here couldn't read or write. If I see that there is a group of them, when we have mat time ..... I will push back the door and say "your child has notes, it is just telling you that the Kindergarten will be closed for two weeks".(Teacher No6)

It is interesting that this deficit view persists despite research such as Heath's (1986) which states that most children bring at least a strong oral tradition to early education, even though illiterate parents cannot fulfil all the dimensions of literacy backgrounds proposed by Teale and Sulzby (1989). Hughes (1989) research with reception class teachers had similar findings. Teachers in Hughes study said that children were egocentric and immature, lacked basic skills/knowledge and were unable to socialise. They also thought that children showed poor concentration, showed little evidence of social training and poor language skills. Teachers blamed these "deficits" on the home environment, stating that there was no language in the home, no stimulation and social problems (such as non stereotypical family groupings). Hughes (1989) compared teachers beliefs about certain children with observation of the child at home and at school, and with the parents beliefs about the child, and was unable to support the teacher's claims that there was no language or stimulation. Children were clearly articulate in the dialect of the home, a finding with some parallels to Tizard and Hughes (1984) findings of how children learn at home and at school.

2) Provider of an environment/ ask questions/encourage experimentation

The following group of 'roles' have been clustered together as they seem to embody the strategies that Meade (1985) describes as being essential to a successful free play curriculum, which is to not only provide the environment but to know when step in and step out of the child's activities.

I think children learn by being involved with people. People putting in their input and enthusiasm and providing a rich environment for children. I think if they're left to their

own devices, even with the most wonderful things, they're not going to reach their optimum development. But I also think it's very important for people to step in and give the children what they need and then back off and let them develop on their own, no we smother them. this is a middle class problem that often happens and you do have to have faith that children do have all these things inside them and stand back and let them go. For me, just rich environments, talking, books, reading, all those sorts of things are just so important. The written word and actually seeing things written down.(Teacher No7)

I actually think we play a big role. And it's not just Kindergarten, but it's the teachers in Kindergarten that play those roles. Because you can have a dead boring Kindergarten with really exciting teachers, but because they've got nothing in it, they're going to extend them with the sand outside or the gifts they've got in them, as opposed to this wonderful building with really dumb teachers...(Teacher No2)

You have to ask open ended questions so that the child ends up doing its own experimenting and own solutions...in the long run they'll gain more from it because they've actually done all the work. I mean it would be very easy to sit down and say "this is how you do it" but it wouldn't be them, they wouldn't have gone through the process of doing things"(teacher No1)

These quotes are clear examples of Meade's (1985) description of New Zealand free play curriculums, where the child is seen as "an active learner with his or her knowledge being constructed rather than acquired" (p.112). Although children may gain an understanding of the physical world, through playing with sand, water and blocks; they also learn about the social world of the school (Tizard and Hughes, 1984). A new code of behaviour is introduced to them, along with routines, how to communicate with staff and how to focus on play. All of these things teach the child what is considered to be appropriate behaviour in a school setting. The play environment gives the child room to explore, make a noise and to make a mess, but learning by observing an adult or talking with an adult may be excluded if adults are not aware of how powerful their role in the learning environment can be (Meadows and Cashdan, 1988).

A child centred free play curriculum can be seen as an example of Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) define as a "progressive" curriculum, in which the child is seen to achieve higher levels of development as a result of structured though natural interactions with the physical and social environment. Spodek and Saracho (1990) suggest that this linking of human development and education has lead to the conception of the teacher as a child development specialist.

This view is in fact endorsed by the Ministry of Education in New Zealand by the principles in the Charter Handbook (1989), which state that "the curriculum is the sum total of the children's direct and indirect learning experiences in early childhood centres. It promotes the physical, social, emotional and intellectual development of young children while responding to the needs of families" (1989, p.9).The guiding

principles for curriculum design were further expanded within the section entitled "the learner" (1989, p.7) in the following way :

> "the environment must facilitate children's curiousity, active exploration and self-paced and directed learning. The importance and power of play must be recognised. There must be time for children to think and dream".

These principles are integral to "Te Whariki", the new national early childhood curriculum guidelines, which are based on development of the "whole child" and draw strongly on the theories of Piaget and Erikson for guide-lines for appropriate practice (Carr and May, 1991).

3) Teaching skills

It is interesting that few of the teachers stressed that they used teaching skills to educate children. Teacher No.3 states that this has happened with experience, as she has realised that teaching in the traditional sense of the word is appropriate. This point is also related to the need to have some formal structure in the curriculum. Teacher No.10 relates how frazzled she got coping with 30 young children aged just over three years in a "free play" curriculum :"We weren't actually surviving, by the end of the afternoon we were really frazzled, and we weren't working with them on a one to one or even in a group successfully".

Showing them ...this is a piece of paper and these are some things you can stick on it. and so how to get form A to B. We actually spend a lot of time with them doing those types of things. Teaching them those skills. And until they have learnt then they can't really sort of go onto the next stage of actually thinking independently that "hey well now I want to make an aeroplane" or whatever it is that they want.(Teacher No5)

I am feeling quite comfortable now about getting children sometimes to come and play say "lets do something with this" because of a need. But that took me a while to come to grips with because I didn't want to push my ideas onto the child. I teach skills. They develop creativity.(Teacher No3)

Desforges (1989), in his research with seven early grade teachers of maths, found that despite the rhetoric of teachers who endorsed constructivist /progressive teaching theories, 90% of maths work took the form of pencil and paper routine exercises. There was a noticeable gap between their beliefs and practices, but a gap that teachers were well aware of. In Desforges (1989) it was because teachers were overloaded with information and routines were a way of coping with with the overload. Here the gap is acknowledged by both teachers No.3 and 5, but it is to meet the needs of children. Teacher No.10 described the sort of overload experienced by Desforges teachers, as she attempted to live up to the demands of providing"free play" and to meet the individual needs of children. Spodek (1988) states that teachers don't rely on

developmental theory when making classroom decisions. In stead, they rely on what Genishi (1992) calls "theories of practice" which they have developed from past practical experience, rather than formal training.

4) Experts/ Parent Educators

I very much see our role as a referral role to other agencies wherever possible because our resources are pretty much stretched to the limit already. But that very much depends on the parents needs and you have to play it by ear I think. You need to know that fine line as to when they are needing extra help.(Teacher No12)

Doing parent workshops and things like that where you, basically with women that are older than you, more experienced than you in life experiences, had three children and you hadn't any and you're trying to teach them you know some parenting skills of some kind or about early childhood. But you know as you're always told well you are the so called expert in that area and they are coming to you.(Teacher No9)

Increasingly our role is going to be one of parents education. And of supporting parents to help them to find support that is culturally and socially appropriate to them.(Teacher No12)

Sometimes families are not aware of the resources within the community, and we find that by taking the Kindergarten children to resources within this immediate community we get the parents to use them more. Like there is a branch of the Library here, there is ... Park and two wonderful children's playgrounds. If we organise walks and outings to those areas, then the parents become aware that they are there, and they will use them too. And another one that the children absolutely loved was the library bus, but it doesn't seem to stop here, I must get another...it used to stop by the dairy here and it was lovely because they were there for half and hour and we could take two different groups up to get a book off the library bus, and that was really quite special, and lots of families started to use it then. Some parents feel a bit threatened by things like that because they don't have the information about it.(Teacher No11)

And helping the children to sequence events verbally and get them in their mind. Until they can do that they can't read. It's absolutely essential. And teaching children that one of those things that every one knows in our Kindergarten that when you're writing children's names we tell all of the parents at pre-entry, when you write your child's name please write it on the top left hand corner and we talk about emergent reading skills and impart those things to parents so that they're working with the children as well. (Teacher No7)

Although the role of "expert" or "parent educator" did not sit comfortably with many of the teachers, the comment that parents see them as "social welfare type" people was very common. However, as Parr et al (1991) point out, teachers are seen as and see themselves as experts, and this contrasts with parents who are seen as having little to offer to discussions of curriculum or pedagogy. Parr and colleagues state that this is surprising considering that most early childhood centres and new entrant classes have an open door policy, b ut "ironically, parents do not seem to be regarded by the professionals as anything remotely bordering on equal partners, but then nor do they view themselves as such.

Similarly, Hughes (1989) found that teachers were reluctant to involve parents of "deprived" children in the classroom, as they would provide a poor language model. There is enormous variety of involvement of parents in these Kindergartens. Some parents are involved in Management Committees, many in fundraising. Some Kindergartens have active rostered parent help schemes, while others have no involvement at all. Kindergartens 2 and 12 were noteworthy, in that No.2 had the most active parent help roster (a parent for every session) and No.12 because they had parents involved with the planning of activities and they were involved in the classroom, particularly with regard to cross cultural issues.

How children learn - the curriculum issues

The way that these teachers conceptualise the purposes and outcomes of their curriculum is discussed in terms of four emerging themes:

1) Free play/enriched environment
2) Readiness
3) Structure
4) Talking with teachers

1) Free play/enriched environment

As previously mentioned, a "free play" philosophy is founded upon the belief that the child actively constructs knowledge of the world, as they act on objects in space and time. Such a view has theoretical roots in Piagetian theory (Wood, 1988). This view of child development is reinforced in the New Zealand Charter Handbook by the minimum standards for equipment and by the supervisors in Meade's (1985) study in their emphasis on purchasing bigger and better equipment. Meadows and Cashdan (1988) report that play has been idealised as a spontaneous, absorbing, refreshing, enjoyable, creative, ideal way to learn. Furthermore, play enthusiasts claim that humans need to play in order to learn, to work off surplus energy and to practise skills. Perhaps these claims have some truth, but they do not give a watertight reason for elevating play into the <u>way</u> of learning.

Giving them as many experiences as we can and talking about them. Talking through what happened at the beginning, the middle, the end and all the basic things. In fact if you don't have those things by the time the child learns physically to read, the readings done.(Teacher No7)

You can't have a curriculum that is too set, it has to have a lot of freedom there, freedom of choice for them, otherwise they back off it. Because that is probably the life they are used to, that freedom and their own choice.(Teacher No6)

Learn through play (Teacher No9)

Our Kindergarten is a resource based programme, which means that the resources are available to children and along with encouragement and things they can do with those things what they choose, with certain guidelines, so its not a formal structured programme. We have a lot of structure, but within a wide structure children are free to choose they ways in which they approach things themselves.(Teacher No7)

A very wide environment to experiment in and through that experimentation comes learning(Teacher no1)

They learn by observing others. By helping others. By experimenting with the material that is there. (teacher N01)

They are going to see that yes, it is interesting to learn, it is a really fun thing to do. We try and get it to be fun so that they can go to school happy and secure in the knowledge that they can succeed, and that they can give themselves new challenges, they can work independently. I believe that they are going to know all those concepts through being at kindergarten, but I don't believe that ... Kindergarten's sole role is in preparing for school. I believe that early childhood is a separate stage of development and should be seen like that, it should not be seen as a preparatory role for school.(TeacherNo8)

Children becoming independent, children being able to help themselves and a lot of attitudes, developing positive attitudes as they move through the centre so that they want to continue the learning process.(Teacher No4)

From experiences, so the more experiences you provide, the more a child develops physically. By putting that thing there that they have to jump over, as opposed to walking around. So to me there's just so many different ways that you can develop physically. Emotionally there are so many ways you can develop. by coming into contact with everyday things, sad things, happy things, joyous things.(Teacher No2)

It's very much an open type child centred curriculum base and I think we perhaps ...emphasise the totality of the child and look at all areas of development, social, emotional, etc. and I think we tend to favour a fairly holistic view of the curriculum where there is much interrelation between area of curriculum, maths, science and language, rather than see separate curriculum areas basically, there's sort of an interrelation between the areas, with concepts that can be developed accordingly.(Teacher No12)

I don't believe that children can learn to read if they haven't heard the words, I don't think that children can learn to play if they have never been allowed to make a mess.(Teacher no11)

Justifications for a Piaget derived theory of the appropriateness of play as the way to learn in a preschool environment have three major sources (Meadows and Cashdan, 1988, p.49) :

1) Assimilation - according to Piaget, children fit materials to a play scheme, concentrating on those that fit the scheme and ignoring the rest. Later accounts (derived from Piaget) make play a balance between assimilation and accommodation, which implies that play in itself is a deficient way of learning, as it lacks testing against reality.

2) Activity - originally simply being actively involved in play was considered sufficient for learning to occur. More recently, theorists have suggested that "thinking about what has been done" is also required.

3) Readiness - learning is controlled and limited by development. This view advocates that there is no point to accelerating beyond the child's level of development or to teach skills which the child is not ready for. In play, children will choose the activity that they are ready for.

Piaget's theory acknowledges that social experience and interpersonal behaviour are an important part of development, but in his theory they play a limited and secondary role. Social interaction (especially with other children) mainly contributes to development by exposing the child to other points of view, providing opportunity for the child to rethink her own point of view. However, such a change can only occur when the child is in an appropriate state of "readiness" to accommodate a new concept. As Wood (1988) states ".for Piaget, any social facilitation of development only works when the child's own understanding, based on his commerce with nature, is in an appropriate state of readiness for change" (p.16). In contrast, Wood suggests that developmental readiness is an inappropriate way of understanding how children learn. Social interaction between the child, other children and other adults is the means by which Wood proposes that children achieve a "joint construction" of knowledge of the world around them.

Such critiques of Piagetian theory have been criticized by Smith (1989), who states that Piaget's theory has been misinterpreted by socio-cognitive-developmental theorists such as Wood (1988) and Hughes (1986). Smith claims that Piaget agreed that children have a cultural heritage, but that access is insufficient. Piaget says that transmission only occurs when three criteria are met:

1) Each person has a common scale of values, shown in mutually agreed use of meanings, rules.

2) Interpersonal conservation and absence of contradiction between participants.

3) Reciprocity - the same conditions apply to all participants.

Smith's suggestion is that social experiences lead to exchange of thought when all three criteria are met. Both Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories agree on the need for access, but disagree on the role of mediation. For Piaget this is when a matching of minds occurs. For Vygotsky, it occurs as the adult/peer mediates the culture/knowledge for the child.

Meadows and Cashdan (1988) cite some studies of "free play" programmes in Britain, which provide interesting insights and questions for research in New Zealand. Tizard et al (1988) report that in their London study, free play observed was brief, simple and low level, possibly because the children were distracted by other materials,

other children or that they were not put under any pressure by staff to complete any projects. Staff were rarely involved with children's activities, and there were no sustained games or conversations. More talk was observed between children, than between staff and children. Similarly, Burberry's (1980) Bristol study found that free play was simple and short in duration. There was little adult-child talk and no sustained conversation. Most adult talk was about play or instructive. Sylva and her colleagues (1980) found in the Oxfordshire groups that conversations between staff and children were rare, that there was a lack of challenging activity and that children engaged in only brief and simple play. As Meadows and Cashdan (1988) conclude "It seems clear that a very high proportion of children's free play over the range of preschool centres is pleasant, keeps them busy, and does provide opportunities for learning and practising skills; but there is not much challenge , not much discovery, not much excitement, not much sustained conversation and not much persistence at working something out" (p.37). The outcomes in terms of cognitive gains compared to children who haven't attended preschool are negligible (Sylva, 1988), however children who have attended such child initiated programme have been found to display a long term social competence (Scwheinhart e al, 1986).

2) Readiness

This issue of social competence is addressed by some of the Kindergarten teachers, but it is linked to a notion of readiness. It could be seen as the teachers believing in preparing children for the culture of the school. There are links here with the teachers view of their role as filling a gap or a deficit. This corresponds with some of the principles of Headstart, which were to provide an innoculation against school failure (Schweinhart et al, 1986)

It is getting them ready for school, but it is also teaching them a lot of other things that perhaps they wouldn't have. It is probably opening up the world a little bit more than what they would otherwise have if they didn't come to Kindergarten. And they are learning those skills of mixing with other children, learning to cope with different situations in life.(Teacher No6)

When they come to this morning Kindergarten at four and a half, six months before they go to school they are expected to be sitting for quite a length of time, listening. So I think that's just it, that's a good time to actually start and get them ready to start that.(Teacher No9)

I always believe there is an optimum time for learning a particular skill, so you can try and try to teach someone....it is a readiness concept I guess. that unless a child is ready, they are not going to learn a skill as quickly as they would if they had naturally become ready. So at some stage a child becomes ready and interested in learning to write their name, it doesn't mean anything to them up until that stage, you can try, but if they not ready for it, it is not going to happen.(Teacher No8)

Like children for instance who are at the two year old telescopic language stage, children revert to telescopic language right till they are nine or ten, as suits them, and it just depends when you happen to be listening, what you are going to hear. Like we had two really good examples at the moment with children who fairly constantly speak in two word sentences, and then startling the boots of you by saying "I hate dinosaurs when I am by myself", those sorts of things. And I get concerned that some educationalists are inclined to put dividing lines between the stages.(Teacher No11)

Walsh (1989) believes that a rather sentimental view of children and childhood has persisted with early childhood teachers. Walsh argues that most developmental theory in use is based on Piagetian theory, but a vulgar form of Piagetian theory which has an emphasis on biological maturation rather than equilibration. Similarly, Halliwell (1983) in her Australian study on curriculum found that most early childhood teachers vascillate between a romantic/maturationist stance (of the inner virtues and abilities unfolding) and a progressive stance (regarding the interaction between biological potential and environmental influence).

Internationally, a normative maturational view held sway after WW11 (with the influence of the Gesell Institute and "the gift of time") and the influence of the new theories of Piaget and Skinner. In this same period, New Zealand was enormously influenced by some of these ideas through the influence of Susan Isaacs and the Playcentre movement. Further back still, of course, Kindergartens in New Zealand were based on the work of Froebel and his age graded "gifts". Psychanalytic theory also had an influence on early childhood with beliefs about he importance of development in the first five years, resolving conflict through dramatic play and the pervasive notion that "play is the child's work".

Smith and Shephard (1988) in interviews with 40 early childhood teachers found that nativism was a key element. Nativism as an extreme belief is "the development of school readiness is an internal organismic process unrelated to environmental intervention". Maturation was seen by these teachers to dominate over environmental factors in school success.

3) Structure

It is interesting that many of the teachers in this study were uneasy when asked about their curriculum. Some, such as Teacher No.11 acknowledge that curriculum is seen as a "dirty word" in early childhood circles in New Zealand. Despite this, many of the teachers did talk about their "free play" integrated curriculums, although this focus was particularly concerned with the reasons for the structure that they had chosen.

Personally, for myself, I have seen that it works effectively and is practical when you have got three teachers to forty children at this age group. You know that children are learning even if there is no adult there, so that you can free yourself to work with an individual or a small group. so you know that learning is happening, and you know the children are experiencing something. It may be a bit worthwhile without an adult there to question, to provide extension, but it is the best you can do with the resources you have got.(Teacher No8)

It doesn't matter what age they start. because we are expecting that when it got up to about 3:8, 3:10 and it was just a general expectation, that the children would come in with quite a few skills. Like they probably know how to hold a paint brush properly and be able to wipe it without us really having to sit down and show them. And they probably would be able to cut and to use the toilet by themselves they re not, they are not actually getting taught at home anything until they come to Kindergarten. So it is partly why we have restructured the afternoon programme. Those ten will get older and will start dropping down. I mean if they were three that would be an expectation we wouldn't have of them. We weren't actually surviving, by the end of the afternoon we were really frazzled, and we weren't working with them on a one to one or even in a group successfully.(Teacher No10)

This is what parents want and this is why we actually get a lot of children who come from out of the area. Because they like some structure in the programme. The children are really happy doing it, because it would soon show if they didn't.(Teacher No2)

When people suggest curriculum it is considered a bit of a dirty word, but we as a teaching team we have have decided that we would enjoy having a curriculum as a guideline, not to be bound by, like in a sense it is our responsibility to ensure that we are covering all areas adequately, and at present we are confident we are. So that we have talked quite at length the three of us about how "wouldn't it be lovely" especially in things like Maori, that the variance of the Maori that is offered form one Kindergarten to another is dramatic and it's not usually because of the parents, it is not what the parents have written in the 'Charter and it is not what they want. It is the interest and knowledge of the teachers that seem to decide that sort of area. And we would really enjoy having a curriculum so that we can say "right, we will do that and that and that".(Teacher No11)

We've got down here just some of the things we think are important like self esteem, confidence and language and communication skills, decision making...we've got early maths and literacy. And then we put our social one...ability to interact cooperatively with other children...and the creative side of it, you know, the imagination and using self expression form the activities we have out for choice everyday, so they can choose what they want to do. And the physical skills, with the outside area, developing physical skills. So our curriculum is based on all of that in that we try to offer something in all those areas as an ongoing programme. So it is never one day we are going to do this and one day we are going to do that. It's happening all the time.(Teacher No4)

These quotes have been included, because they are good indications that despite the rhetoric, teachers are realistic about the appropriateness of free play to all children. For teacher No.10 in particular, the free play curriculum had been deemed to be a failure with young children. This is an interesting link with Desforges (1989) finding, that teachers endorse constructivist teaching , but do not practice it because it is unmanageable in the setting. These teachers have also found it unmanageable. The first because of the age of the children and their need to be taught skills, the second

because of the 2:40 ratio and the third to have some sense of continuity with other programmes offered.

4) Talking with teachers

They learn from the environment, so if you environment is stimulating and exciting and things are happening I think the children are bound to get something out of it. Learning from their experiences that they have , and talking. Like instead of just being left to play on their own, being included and talked to and told what I am, washing the dishes, how I am washing the dishes or whatever. Yes, so being involved in what you are doing, so that they can learn from that(Teacher No9)

They would have to have the desire to learn. They are not going to learn anything unless they are really motivated to learn. Some children don't need any motivation but some need a lot more. So you have to find out what interests them and how and just feed them and have available a new sort of resources and language experiences. Well sort of what we hope our curriculum caters for. But there is ...sometimes ...a limiting factor of your home background and what's inherited. You can extend to a certain extent.(Teacher No3)

Children are helping adults, adults are helping the children, and the children are helping each other. (Teacher No2)

A lot of it is through our oral communications and conversations. Developing their own ideas and talking through them and often writing them down. A wonderful example is this brilliant story that a child told and was written down, and the picture attached to it. One of our teacher's is extremely skilled in this area. And again with this pirate thing, it all started from a small group, talking about what they wanted to do, and the language is explored and we'll develop on that next week. They write stories from it, or that may be an outcome, it depends on the children involved, as some have tendencies that way and some need a lot more encouragement. Just some amazing results. That's certainly an area that's being developed at the moment.(Teacher No12)

To me it is because their expectation are different. They are looking at achievement, they don't look at social skills and they don't even look at modes of thinking, I mean that really concerns me. One of the advantages I see in children who have been to Kindergarten, is that hey have learnt to think, and that a lot of children who don't have ear pre-school experiences, not just Kindergarten incidentally, actually miss out on the learning to think because answers are given, or answers are never given so you stop asking. Whereas at pre-school children are taught "why do you think", "what happened when", all of that....(Teacher No11)

All of these quotes are interesting examples of scaffolding, as described by Bruner (1986), in which teachers are working from a child's developmental level and scaffolding their learning using the child's interest base. It is interesting that again both Teachers 9 and 3 frame their discussion in Piagetian terms, that the child must learn from their own interest and motivation base, but they both indicate points where their extension of the child's learning is appropriate. Teacher No.3 indicates that this is appropriate when she perceives a gap or deficit to be made up.

Conclusion

As part of a larger research project designed to look at literacy development in Kindergarten, the present research set out to explore the "implicit theories" of a group of Head Kindergarten teachers in one urban area. Interviews involved the nature of teacher's knowledge that they use in their teaching practice. Analysis of the data involved using a thematic approach to examine how teachers perceive their role as teachers and to investigate how these teachers believe that children learn. It was important to identify the teachers prevailing theoretical orientation before undertaking a small scale curriculum development using emergent literacy research.

The interesting result is that most teachers have described what Genishi (1992) calls a theory of practice. These are theories about children, development, teaching and assessment that underlie teachers curricular decisions and interactions. Genishi (1992) states that theories of practice can be prescriptive, and it is interesting to note the degree of congruence between the teachers beliefs, despite the fact that these teachers have been practising for as little as three years to as many as twenty three years. There are differences, of course, such as those few teachers who believe in "teaching skills" and those who promote or wish to promote a certain "structure" in the curriculum. These differences are testimony to Spodek's (1988) statement that teachers "implicit theories" may vary, even within one city.

In many ways, the "implicit theories" of these teachers are eclectic; they range from a normative maturational perspective to a belief in scaffolding, all encompassed by a belief in appropriate practice. However, the "governing obsession" (Greene, 1988) of these teachers appears to be a belief in constructivism, that children are active learners, who need to learn through interaction with the environment. The major role of these teachers is to encourage children to interact with the environment. However, there is recognition that "free play" may not be appropriate to all children, but that the child initiated programme is 'common sense' to coping with few teachers and eighty children in two sessions per day.

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